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SUBJECT: ROMANIAN SENATE PRESIDENT DENIES ROMANIAN ANTISEMITISM, MINIMIZES ROMANIAN ROLE IN HOLOCAUST

1. (SBU) Summary. Social Democratic Party (PSD) Senate President Nicolae Vacaroiu denied the existence of anti-Semitism in Romania and downplayed Romania's role in the Holocaust during an April 7 meeting with visiting U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad Chairman Warren Miller. Vacaroiu recognized the role of Romania's World War II dictator in atrocities and pledged support for establishment of a Holocaust remembrance memorial in Bucharest. However, many of his comments indicated a failure to acknowledge core facts presented by the Wiesel Commission and mainstream commentators on Romanian anti-Semitism and participation in the Holocaust. Charge is sending Vacaroiu a letter correcting the latter's fallacious assertions. End Summary.

2. (SBU) U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad Chairman Warren Miller traveled to Bucharest April 5-8 for a series of meetings with key figures to discuss efforts to help protect sites of historical and cultural importance to Jews and other groups who were victims of the Holocaust in Romania. Senior officials in the Liberal-Democratic (PNL-PD) alliance led government, such as Presidential Advisor Andrei Plesu and Minister of Culture Monica Musca, expressed strong support for Romanian efforts to redress its Holocaust past and commitment to implementing recommendations found in the Wiesel Commission report. These include establishment of a Holocaust memorial in a prominent location in Bucharest. However, discussions with center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) Senate President Nicolae Vacaroiu on April 7 raised concerns about lingering unwillingness to confront the country's past among prominent members of the political class.

3. (SBU) Vacaroiu, a longstanding PSD leader and power broker within the party, initiated the conversation by asserting that Romania began redressing its past involvement in the Holocaust immediately after the 1989 revolution. He lauded the GOR's "positive relations" with Israel. He also acknowledged the role of Romania's World War II era dictator Antonescu in the 1941 Iasi Pogrom, in which some 15,000 Jews were killed. After that discussion, however, much of the conversation focused on Vacaroiu's attempt to diminish Romania's role in the Holocaust or effort to deny the existence of anti-Semitism in Romania today. He also claimed that 95 percent of the atrocities committed against over 400,000 Romanian Jews during World War II occurred in the occupied territories of Bessarabia and Transnistria, with limited--if any--involvement of Romanian soldiers. He inaccurately stated that atrocities were committed almost exclusively by members of the Iron Guard and Legionaire movement, both associated with extreme nationalism before and during the War. The view that only a few Romanians participated in atrocities - and not the Romanian army - is dismissed by mainstream historians and, conversely, typically expressed by extreme nationalist Holocaust deniers. Vacaroiu's focus on Bessarabia and Transnistria has also been used by extreme nationalists who claim that the Holocaust did not happen in Romania, although the territories were part of Romania at the time and it is a fact that numerous Jews resident in the traditional Romanian territories were expelled to Transnistria and were there subject to various atrocities.

4. (SBU) When Chairman Miller asked his views about the existence of anti-Semitism in Romania today, Vacaroiu unequivocally replied that it "absolutely is not a problem." When pressed, Vacaroiu retorted that over half of Romania's communist government was Jewish (again, a view rejected by mainstream historians). He further stated that observers would find it difficult to find more than "a handful of individuals" in Romania who espouse anti-Semitic views. This view disregards the continued presence of the many members of the extreme nationalist Greater Romania Party (PRM), a party which has been a strong anti-Semitic movement for most of its post-1989 history and which gained some 13 percent of the vote during fall 2004 elections.

5. (SBU) Chairman Miller pushed back and cited the controversial 1997 and 1998 rehabilitation by Romania's

Supreme Court of two Romanian Generals, Radu Dinulescu and Gheorge Petrescu, who were lead perpetrators of Holocaust atrocities. He also took note of growing anti-Semitism, wrapped in anti-Israel discourse, throughout Europe. Vacaroiu responded that he had no knowledge of the court decision on Dinulescu and insisted that the Romanian people, as a whole, "accept Romania's past" and hold "no trace of anti-Semitism."

16. (SBU) Vacaroiu conceded that continuing education on the Holocaust is needed, in line with recommendations by the Wiesel Commission. Chairman Miller conveyed that the Wiesel Commission urged Romania to establish a national Holocaust memorial, funded by the GOR and located in a prominent place on government property. Chairman Miller noted that the U.S. also urges this important step and Vacaroiu pledged support for the memorial, while remarking that some parliamentarians may hold "somewhat differing views" on the topic. Vacaroiu did not relent when pressed on his earlier comments on anti-Semitism and the Romanian role in the Holocaust, even when queried as to how Romania's Jewish population was reduced from some 750,000 before World War II to roughly 300,000 immediately after.

17. (SBU) Comment: Aside from Vacaroiu, all other officials in Chairman Miller's meetings acknowledged Romania's role in the Holocaust and the fundamental importance of education on the issue. This included often enthusiastic support for a Romanian Holocaust memorial. Their general attitude was a sign of the tremendous progress Romania has made in acknowledging its role in the Holocaust, a historical truth that was largely suppressed under communism. Nonetheless, Vacaroiu's comments -- sometimes couched in language that seemed to support efforts to redress the past -- demonstrate there are still influential pockets where old attitudes prevail. Vacaroiu's assertions were similar to public statements made in 2003 by former President Iliescu and former Culture and Religion Minister Razvan Theodorescu denying the Holocaust occurred within Romanian borders and diminishing the participation of the Romanian government and army in atrocities. Iliescu subsequently apologized and agreed to establish the Wiesel Commission to compile an accurate history of the Holocaust in Romania and recommend steps to improve education on the historic facts.

18. (SBU) Comment Continued: Charge is sending a letter to Vacaroiu, with a copy of the Weisel Commission report, refuting the inaccurate assertions Vacaroiu raised during the meeting with Chairman Miller. More broadly, the Embassy will continue to press the GOR to establish a comprehensive program on Holocaust education, not just at the elementary, secondary and university level, but also programs aimed at officials and opinion leaders. The mandatory inclusion of Holocaust education in the curriculum of the National Defense College, a feature for the past several years, is an example of "continuing education" targeting officials who, like Senate President Vacaroiu, are ignorant about Romania's true role in the Holocaust.

19. (U) Amembassy Bucharest's reporting telegrams, as well as daily press summaries, are available on the Bucharest SIPRNET Website: www.state.gov/p/eur/bucharest.

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